

Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee
136th General Assembly

Chair Shaffer, Vice Chair Koehler, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and distinguished members of the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee; My name is Giovanna Alvarez, and I have the pleasure of serving you as Executive Director of the Ohio Latino Affairs Commission.

On behalf of OCHLA's Board of Commissioners and the more than 566,000 Hispanic/Latino Ohioans, we respectfully request your support for our FY 2026–2027 budget, as recommended by Governor DeWine and approved by the Ohio House of Representatives."

At OCHLA, we strive to serve the Hispanic/Latino community to the best of our abilities and comply with the mandates entrusted to us by law.

Latinos are the largest ethnic minority population in the U.S., comprising 18.7% of the total U.S. population in 2020 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

The Hispanic/Latino population in Ohio is young and vibrant, currently comprising over 566,000 individuals, or 4.8% of Ohio's total population. We live in all 88 counties and represent one of Ohio's fastest-growing workforce populations. Our median age is 27.5 years, and there are over 136,000 Hispanic/Latino students enrolled in elementary and secondary schools.

Most Hispanic Ohioans live in urban areas of the state. Thirty percent of Hispanic Ohioans reside in one of the four following cities: Columbus, Cleveland, Toledo, and Lorain. The Hispanic population makes up a higher proportion of county populations in the northern and northwestern sections of Ohio, many of which are rural in nature. We play an important role in Ohio's agriculture industry, contributing as migrant and seasonal workers, thus meeting a need when Ohio is experiencing an unprecedented agricultural labor shortage.

Furthermore, Ohio is home to 20,000 Latinos who have proudly served in our nation's Armed Forces!

In addition, the report "*Ohio Hispanic American: Snapshot from the 2023 American Community Survey*," authored by The Ohio Department of Development, Office of Research (Feb 2025), states that there are nearly 3,000 Hispanic/Latino-owned businesses providing employment to 26,500 Ohioans, with an annual payroll of close to \$1.2 billion dollars. These businesses contribute significantly to job creation, income, and tax revenue for the state! This makes the work of our Commission highly relevant for the future of Ohio. Investment in the Hispanic/Latino community is instrumental for the economic health of our state as our community continues to grow at a steadfast pace.

UCHLA is governed by an 11-member board appointed by the Governor. We employ a very small but mighty team of 3.5 staff members and carefully focus our resources on the administration's priorities in areas of access to health, education, job creation, leadership development, and economic development for children and families.

In particular, our commission's priorities align with the new executive budget plan by supporting the following initiatives:

- Promoting access to children's physical and mental health including literacy, vision care, and other programs.
- Encouraging talented Ohioans and the youth to expand their skills and pursue their educational goals to forge careers in the most in-demand job industries.
- Supporting business creation and workforce development initiatives.
- Increasing support for social service organizations, nonprofits and family wrap-around services.

With your support, our Commission will continue to support organizations that serve the Latino community with capacity development efforts and will maintain our mandate to connect our constituents throughout the state. We believe it is critical for the Commission to maintain its full-time staff and funding request, as presented, to sustain a reasonable performance level and satisfy our statutory mandates.

Our three key programmatic priorities for FY 26-27 are the following:

- Maintain present support systems and services functioning at optimal level, including our resource directories such as OLANet, constituent services, an effective social media presence, along with continued community engagement to connect Latinos to government and vice versa.
- Increase capacity building opportunities in Education, Health, Workforce and Economic Development to empower the Latino community in Ohio and support their development and success.
- Advise the Governor, the General Assembly, state agencies and partners on issues affecting Latinos, particularly regarding health and well-being, and supporting economic development for all Ohioans.

Our team regularly participates in several Latino networking groups across the state to interact with over 300 leaders. The Commission's virtual hub of directories is a one-stop solution for constituents, local and state government officials, and those in the public and private sectors wanting to connect with Latinos in Ohio. Commission staff have served in several task forces and advisory roles to provide our expertise on matters related to the Hispanic/Latino community, government services, and outreach strategy, as reported in our most recent annual report.

In addition, the Commission regularly partners with state agencies and serves on several advisory groups. We work closely with the Ohio Department of Development, the Ohio Small Business Enterprise, the Department of Health, the Department of Education and Workforce, the Bureau of Workers' Compensation, The Ohio Department of Behavioral Health and every Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in the State!

Our work continues to increase as the size and percentage of Ohio's Latino population grow at unprecedented rates!

In keeping with the Governor's top priorities, our Commission has prioritized mental health programming. For the past five years, OCHLA has partnered with the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (Now renamed Department of Behavioral Health) and secured grants totaling over \$2 million, positively impacting the mental health and well-being of the community at large!

The Hispanic/Latino community in Ohio seeks the Commission's support to enhance civic engagement and strengthen connections with their state legislators. In March, we hosted a Hispanic/Latino Legislative Day visit where constituents met directly with their elected representatives to voice their priorities. Most recently, on Monday April 28th, we convened a Behavioral Health and Education Summit.

These initiatives are part of a broader strategy to improve access to resources and foster long-term civic participation. With sustained support and appropriate budgetary investment, we can continue delivering impactful programming that builds a stronger Ohio.

The Ohio Latino Affairs Commission can assist the state of Ohio in remaining competitive in the national landscape by attracting and engaging a growing workforce, providing a pipeline of workers for traditional Ohio jobs in agriculture, as well as for the jobs of the future in STEM-related careers, business creation, construction, infrastructure, and sustainability. Together, we can keep Ohio growing and thriving!

Chair Shaffer, and distinguished members of the Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify. On behalf of our OCHLA Board of Commissioners, I am happy to answer any questions committee members may have at this time.